Arab. arch. epig. 1996: 7: 304–315
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Arabian archaeology
and epigraphy
ISSN 0905-7196

Notes on the Aramaic script of some coins from East Arabia

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This article provides preliminary remarks on the Aramaic scripts of coins from eastern Arabia. After giving a presentation of the palaeography of some coins from Mleiha, it offers suggestions for the reading of the Aramaic legends and the origin of the Aramaic script on them.

The Mleiha coins

The publications of D.T. Potts on the coinage of pre-Islamic Arabia draw attention to a group of coins that have been discovered at several sites in eastern Arabia (1). Many of these coins bear Aramaic legends, most of which belong to a group described as the Abī'il-group. The publication of some of them has raised a number of questions with regard to the reading of the legends and the analysis of the script used. Fortunately, Potts' publications make it possible to study the palaeography of these coins. This article will provide some remarks on the script of these coins and will attempt to suggest a reading for some of the more difficult legends. At the same time, it should be considered as a form of preliminary statement on the script of these coins and as a basis for further studies. The discussion of the scripts is based on photographs of some examples from Mleiha in the United Arab Emirates, which have already been published by Potts. Some remarks on the reading of the Aramaic legends of these coins have already been suggested by W.W. Müller, M.C.A. Macdonald, J. Teixidor and the author (2). The examples under discussion here are the clearest ones among the collection with Aramaic inscriptions. Some of the other coins with Aramaic legends that have been discovered in this region will be also taken into account. Most of these coins bear the name *'by'l/'b'l*, and some of them show the Aramaic word *br* 'son of (X)'. The following is a reading of these coins:

1. *'by'l br tbgln* (Fig. 1, 7.1)

The first word is the name *'by'l*. The second word is most likely to be read as *br*, Aramaic 'son'. Macdonald suggests a reading *brt*, Aramaic 'daughter', and accepts the reading *bgln* for the second name. The *taw* is clear and is written backwards. Since the name is followed by the Aramaic word *br* in several clear cases it is difficult to accept the reading *brt*. It should be noted that the patronymic is problematic. Müller reads the second name as *tym..* and Teixidor as *tmyln* or *tlmy*. Meanwhile, there are no traces of *yod* after the *taw*, which makes it difficult to reconstruct the name *tym*.

The reading of the second name as *bgln* is more probable than *byln*. The form of *gimel* is very close to *yod*. Nevertheless, no



Fig. 1.

name *byln* is known, but *bgln* is to be interpreted according to the Arabic root *bgl* and a tribal name *bağīla* is known. Perhaps the entire five letters comprise a name *tbgln* which could be reconstructed as a *tafʿilān*-form, but such a form is very rare in personal names. Moreover, the reading of the ninth letter is difficult; it could be *mem* or *bet*. *bet* with a long tail is typical of the Aramaic inscriptions from Taymā' but a *mem* with a long tail is unusual in the Aramaic of this period. If we accept the reading of this letter as *mem* then the name may be read as *tmyln*, corresponding to Teixidor's first suggestion. However, it is difficult to interpret this name as Ptolemy. In conclusion, the reading *'by'l br bgln* is to be preferred and the *taw* might be seen as a monogram.

2. *'by'*[*l*]*br*[*t*]*bgln* (Figs 2, 7.2)
Part of the inscription is not visible. This legend belongs to the same group of coins which are depicted with the inscription *'by'l br tbgln*. The letter forms are similar to those on no. 1.

3. *'by'*[l]*br t....* (Figs 3, 7.3)
Only part of the legend is visible, but this legend seems to belong to the same group as nos 1 and 2, and the letters have the same features.

4. *'by'l* (Figs 4, 7.4)
This has the typical lapidary letters which are commonly attested on the coins of Abī'il.

5. *'by'l* (Figs 5, 7.5)
This shows features similar to those on no. 5. The *yod* stems from the lapidary tradition.

6. *'by'l* (Figs 6, 7.6)
Part of the legend is depicted in cursive style (*'by*) while the rest (*'l*) is written in lapidary style. All the letters have small dots on their ends.

7. *'b'* (Fig. 7.7; Mleiha, CNIP 16, no. 338)
It should be noted that the form of the *alef* is developed from the backwards *K* written *alef*. This *alef* might be a chronologically later development than the lapidary *alef*. Part of the legend is not visible and



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

the name *'b'* must be reconstructed as *'b'l*.

8. *'b'l* (Fig. 7.8; Mleiha, CNIP 16, no. 281)
In spite of the unusual type *alef, bet* and *lamed,* the reading of the entire legend as *'b'l* is in no doubt, and it must be noted that the name *'b'l* as well as other parts of the legend are not always visible on the coins.

The Script of the Mleiha coins

alef

There are fifteen examples in the coin le-



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.

gends showing three letter shapes and representing two styles of Aramaic script: the lapidary and the cursive style. The following is a description of this character:

1. The attestation of this legend *'by'l* with two different *alefs* makes the reading of this kind of *alef* clear. There are five examples of the lapidary *alef* in the collection under discussion (Fig. 7.4, 5, 6), and it is the most common *alef* in the Abī'il coins of eastern Arabia. This *alef* consists of a vertical downstroke with a V-form on its left side and its base on the middle of the downstroke. The



Fig. 6.

lapidary *alef* resembles a *K* written backwards. No close parallels for this form are available in the other Aramaic scripts, but there is no doubt that this form is a development from the archetypal Aramaic *alef*. The Mleiha lapidary *alef* can be compared with the Aramaic *alef* of Hatra, which has approximately the shape of a *K* written on its back horizontally (3).

Moreover, two other forms were developed from this *alef* (Fig. 7.7, 8). Of particular interest is the *alef* with a downstroke in the shape of a bow (Fig. 7.7) which stems from the Aramaic lapidary tradition and seems to be a local development in eastern Arabia. A *K* written retrograde for the *he* is attested in Aramaic from the third century BC onwards (4) and continues to be used at Palmyra (5). This seems to be a development from the Aramaic *he* of the Persian period and has nothing to do with the letter *alef*.

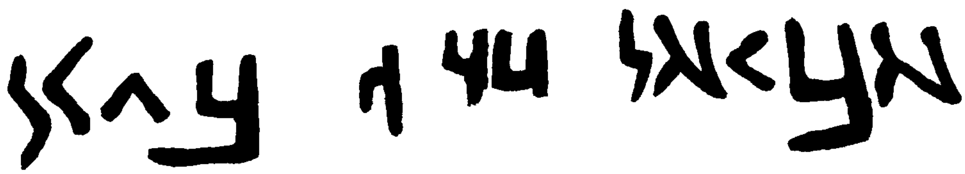
2. The cursive *alef* occurs six times in this collection (Fig. 7.1, 2, 3). It developed out of the elaborated X-form *alef* that is well known in the Aramaic scripts from the third century onwards. However, the origins of this *alef* are to be found in the fifth century BC. The closest forms to this *alef* are from the late fourth and the beginning of the third century BC (6).

3. This *alef* is comprised of two crossed, oblique lines and appears once in this collection (Fig. 7.6). It is more cursive than the second *alef* of this group. The tradition of this *alef* begins in the Aramaic scripts from the end of the fourth and the beginning of the third century BC, but the form continued to be used in other, later (7) Aramaic scripts, such as the Palmyrene script (8). It is described as having an extremely cursive shape.

bet

There are seven examples for *bet* in the legends. Two forms of *bet* can be dis-

1. Mleiha 1: *'by'l br tbgln*



2. Mleiha 2: *'by'l br tbgln*



3. Mleiha 3: *'by'[l] br t...*



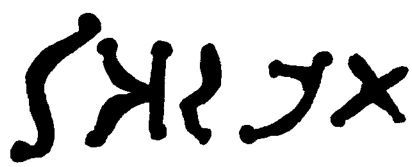
4. Mleiha 4: *'by'l*



5. Mleiha 5: *'by'l*



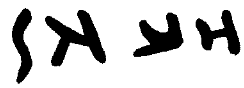
6. Mleiha 6: *'by'l*



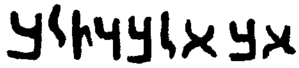
7. Mleiha, CNIP 16, no. 338: *'b'*



8. Mleiha, CNIP 16, no. 281: *'b'l*



9. Robin, no. 5: *'b'l br tym*



10. Robin, no. 6: *'by'l br tymš*



11. CNIP 14, no. 4: *'b'l br tym'l*



12. Teixidor, BES, 124 figure 3: [']*b'l br tymš*



Fig. 7.

tinguished and may be described as follows:

1. Nine examples are found of a lapidary *bet* (Fig. 7.1–4). This is the most prominent form on the coins with Aramaic legends from eastern Arabia. The *bet* has a vertical downstroke and a relatively large, squared, open head. Its relatively long tail runs towards the left. This *bet* derives from the lapidary tradition of the Achaemenid period and is typical of the Aramaic script from the beginning of the fifth century onwards.

However, the open head of the *bet* is a general feature of the Aramaic script. It emerged in the seventh century BC and continued to be used in different offshoots of the Aramaic script. This letter finds its closest parallels in the forms of *bet* used in the Aramaic inscriptions of Taymā' (9). Moreover, the lapidary *bet* appears on the fourth-century BC coins of Tarsus with Aramaic legends (10).

2. The cursive *bet* stems from the cursive tradition of the fifth century BC. The triangular head of the letter is relatively small and open. Its downstroke slants towards the left with a tail at the end going leftwards. Two examples of this *bet* occur in the collection (Fig. 7.5–6).

gimel

Only two examples of *gimel* are attested (Fig. 7.1–2). It has two equal lengths and is relatively small. This *gimel*, described as a 'pup-tent', is known in Aramaic from the

seventh century BC onwards (11). However, it is also typical of fifth-century Aramaic script. This *gimel* can be compared with that of the Aramaic inscriptions of Taymā', which is however larger. It should be noted that the form of the east Arabian *gimel* is very similar to that of the *yod*.

yod
Two forms of *yod* appear in this collection and represent the two traditions of writing *yod* in Aramaic, the lapidary and the cursive. They may be described as follows:

1. The lapidary *yod* (Fig. 7.4–6) stems from the lapidary tradition with only one stroke (12). It is a modification of the archetypal Aramaic *yod* which has two strokes. The same shape was used for the Aramaic *zayin* of the fifth and fourth centuries as well as for the *zayin* of the Aramaic inscriptions of Taymā' (13). However, there is no relation between the two forms of these letters. They indicate different developments of their Aramaic archetype in the eighth and seventh centuries BC.

2. The cursive form derives from the cursive *yod* of the fifth and fourth centuries. A form similar to that of the east Arabian coins can be found during the third century BC (14). Three examples exist in the collection (Fig. 7.1–3).

lamed
This *lamed* (Fig. 7.1–2, 4–6) is comprised of a stroke which goes down to the left and then curves to the right. The curve has an almost angular shape which is typical of the *lamed* in the fifth and fourth centuries. In other examples the *lamed* has a tick on the base in the form of a short tail (Fig. 7.1–2). This kind of *lamed* is found in Aramaic in the late fourth and the beginning of the third centuries (15).

nun
This *nun* stems from the lapidary tradition. It has a short stroke and finds its closest parallels in the Aramaic inscriptions of Taymā'. Two examples are attested (Fig. 7.1–2).

reš
This *reš* has an open head and a vertical downstroke. It is found in the Aramaic lapidary tradition of the fifth and fourth centuries. Only two examples of *reš* occur in this collection (Fig. 7.1,3).

taw
It appears clearly only in one example and belongs to the same tradition of the Aramaic script of this group. It should be noted that this letter is written backwards (Fig. 1.1, 2, 3).

Remarks on other coins with Aramaic legends from eastern Arabia
Additional coins bearing Aramaic legends have been discovered elsewhere in eastern Arabia, for example at Thaj. Some of their legends are difficult to read and have been discussed previously by various scholars (16). The following is a reconsideration of some of these inscriptions.

1. *'by'l br tym* (Fig. 7.10)
This legend is attested on several coins. It has been read by C. Robin as *'b'l br tlbš.* Another issue of the same coin has been read by J. Teixidor as [']*b'l br tlmy* (cf. my reading for this coin Fig. 7.12). However, the reading of the second part of the inscription is unsatisfactory. The reading *'by'l br tym* is based on published photographs of these coins. The variations in the writing of the first name as *'by'l* and *'b'l* seem to be an indication of two different issues of the same coin (7.9,10). However, the first name, which is sometimes written as *'b'l/'by'l,* is

read correctly while the second part of the inscription is not. The word *br*, Aramaic 'son', is clear.

Two issues of this coin must be considered. The first one has the following inscription: *'b'l br tym* (17) while the second reads *'b'l br tymš* (the same as Fig. 7.10) (18). The following three letters in the second part of the legend are to be read as *tym* and the last letter is /*š*/. The name *tym* is not only a well-known personal name in Arabic but is a typical North Arabian personal name. The latter character /*š*/ seems to be a monogram. It is impossible to reconstruct a personal name from the last four letters in this inscription, *tymš*, because there is no space for more letters. One of the coins on which the /*š*/ is written close to the coin perimeter shows that clearly. Both of these specimens have a circle of pellets in the form of a decorative ring comprised of dots, and this makes it possible to define the beginning and end of the inscription.

The script on these coins does not differ from that of the Mleiha examplars, and the forms of the letters of the name *'b'l/'by'l* are in each case similar. Of importance is the form of the *šin*, which without doubt stems from the Aramaic traditions of the fifth and fourth centuries BC and for which good parallels can be found in the Aramaic inscriptions of Taymā'. We also see that the form of the *mem* is similar to *bet*. While the head of the *bet* has a square form, the head of the *mem* is slightly curved, but both have a tail curving to the left. However, this *mem* also derives from the Aramaic traditions of the fifth and the fourth centuries. The *taw* is also from the same tradition and its closest parallels are to be found in the Aramaic inscriptions of Taymā' (19).

It may be suggested that the name *tym* is a short form of the name *tym'l* and that this coin was minted by the same authority as the next coin *'b'l br tym'l*. If *tym* is a short form of the name *tym'lt*, it may correspond to that of a person from Gerrha named *Temallatos* (20) who is mentioned in several inscriptions from Delos. No doubt this name is a compound from the name of the Arabian goddess Allat and the element *tym* meaning 'servant'. On some of these coins, moreover, the letter *š* occurs after *tym*. I have suggested above that this could be a monogram. However, the possibility that this letter is an abbreviation for *šams* must also be considered. Since various people in North and Central Arabia worshipped the Sun goddess *šams* under the name Allat, this legend is of importance in relation to *Temallatos* of Gerrha, not only because the name *tymš*<*tymšms* has the same meaning as *tym'lt*, but also in view of the fact that one of the altars dedicated at Delos by Temallatos bore a solar emblem.

2. *'b'l br tym'l* (Fig. 7.11)

The reading of this legend on a coin from Thaj is difficult. Eleven letters are depicted in a zone between two vertical rows of dots. The following reading from the lower right to the top right may be suggested: *'b'l br tym'l*. The letters of this legend are similar to those from Mleiha and to the legend *'b'l br tym (21). All letters are cursive and stem from the cursive Aramaic tradition except for the bet* which reflects the lapidary tradition. The *mem* is unusual because it is written backwards and has a relatively curved head and is not square like the *bet*. The *alef* (in *tym'l*) is also unusual because of its small form. The closest parallel for this *alef* is found on the coins of Alexander Janneus with Aramaic legend (22). The letter here can be compared with the *alef* of Mleiha, no. 3 (Fig. 3). This legend also appears on another issue discussed by Robin (23) who

reads: *'b'l br tlbš/tlšll(')*. The characters of this coin are, however, different from those of the Thaj coin. Twelve letters occur on the coin discussed by Robin and only eleven on the one from Thaj (*'b'l br tym'l*). On the coin discussed by Robin the first seven letters are to be read as: *'b'l br t*, while the rest of the legend is indecipherable. There are several possible readings, none of which make sense. As Robin has suggested, the final letter may be an *alef*.

Notes on the style and origin of the Aramaic script of the east Arabian coins

The script of these coins is surely Aramaic, but there are several unusual characters, including some letter forms, such as the lapidary *alef*, apparently without parallels elsewhere in the Aramaic script. This *alef* is one of the clearest characteristics of the Aramaic script of eastern Arabia. Because of the paucity of inscriptions from the region, we do not yet know whether these forms are only to be found on the coins or whether they belonged generally to the Aramaic script of eastern Arabia. It is difficult to construct a chronology according to the palaeography of these coins, but the features of the script on these coins belong to the Aramaic traditions of the third and second centuries BC. However, the script of these coins is a continuation of the Aramaic of the fourth century and has its background in the Aramaic of the fifth century.

Coins with Aramaic legends were first used in the mid-fifth century BC in Cilicia. Some of them have the title: *mzdy zy 'l 'brnhr' wḥlk*, 'Mazdaeus who is over beyond the river [Euphrates] and Cilicia'. Coins with Aramaic legends were also being minted in this region and we have good examples from Syria, such as the coins of 'Abdhadad of Hierapolis (Bambyce), who minted coins bearing rulers' names. The name of Alexander the Great (*'lksndr*) appears on one of these coins (24). It must be noted that the tradition of the Aramaic script on these coins is different from that of the coins bearing Aramaic legends discovered in eastern Arabia. The script of the Cilician and Syrian coins does not really help us in studying the palaeography of the east Arabian ones because different types of Aramaic script were used in writing both groups.

One of the most important features of the Aramaic script in the Achaemenid period is the development of local variations in the Aramaic scripts used in the provinces. These variations are characterised by the simultaneous use of archaic and new forms together, or by a mixture of the lapidary and the cursive styles. It must be noted that the available epigraphic material is insufficient to indicate the earliest stage and evolution of the Aramaic script in eastern Arabia (25). Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the Aramaic script of this region emerged from these traditions and that it is closely related to the Aramaic script of Taymā' and its vicinity.

Two different styles of script appear on these coins, the cursive and the lapidary or formal, as it is called by some scholars. This mixture of forms is to be expected because, in the formation of the so-called national scripts (e.g. the Nabataean, Palmyrene and Jewish scripts) during the second century BC and thereafter, such heterogeneity appeared in many scripts.

The different styles of script used on these coins can not be attributed to a chronological development, since the coins are from the same group and from a specific period and might have been minted by the same authority. If the readings of the names of the father of Abī'il are correct, then it must be that more than one person had this name.

Perhaps the name Abī'il was common in eastern Arabia, like Ḥāriṭat among the Nabataeans. The palaeographic variations seem to stem from the personal style of different engravers. Moreover, the legends on these coins seem to have been engraved by professional scribes. The letters have a schematic, oblique and geometric form which testifies to the fact that these coins were produced by skilled masters. One of these engravers appears to know the cursive script while the other knows the lapidary style of the script. We must assume that an engraver of coins sometimes used two forms for writing the same letter, e.g. the *alef* on Mleiha no. 6 (Fig. 6). Furthermore, there are no indications that a distinction was made between the final, medial or initial form of a letter on these coins. Of course, there are some examples in Aramaic script from the third and the second centuries BC for such distinctions, but a clear distinction between final and initial letters is not found until much later in the so-called national scripts, where we have good examples for such distinctions in the Nabatean (26), Palmyrene and other Aramaic scripts.

It is important to understand why the Aramaic language and the Aramaic script was used for writing the legends on these coins. The main reason for using Aramaic seems to be the international importance and role of the Aramaic language at that time. It was understood not only in Syria-Palestine but also in Mesopotamia, eastern and northern Arabia and Iran. The readings given in Fig. 7 represent my suggestions for the different readings of the legends discussed above.

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